



PSYOP unit patrolling  
Afghan village.

# Army SOF in Afghanistan

## Learning the Right Lessons

By FRANK L. JONES

**T**he role of Special Operations Forces (SOF) in Afghanistan is currently being scrutinized for lessons on fighting the global war on terrorism. Initial assessments suggest that coordination between land and air forces signals a revolution in military affairs and perhaps a recipe for defeating terrorists. Some contend that these lessons will become the

basis for military transformation and an important element in future strategic planning.

There are lessons to be learned—the challenge is identifying the right ones. Some might conclude that Afghanistan offered prescriptions for combating terrorism or shaping conventional warfare. This idea stems from the success of special reconnaissance, which aided precision air strikes and direct action missions, but neglects unconventional warfare. In other words, leaders might seek to conventionalize future conflicts. Unconventional warfare capabilities were essential in routing Taliban forces and al Qaeda and will be crucial in defeating enemies elsewhere.

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Hunting for weapons in Afghanistan.



55th Signal Company (Todd M. Roy)

## Unconventional Warfare

It is prudent to reexamine unconventional warfare as the Armed Forces begin to wrestle with military transformation and wage a global war on terrorism. While the term *unconventional warfare* has found its way into various military lexicons for decades, Joint Pub 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, defines it as:

... military and paramilitary operations, normally of long duration, predominantly conducted by indigenous or surrogate forces who are organized, trained, equipped, supported, and directed in varying

degrees by an external source. It includes guerrilla warfare and often direct offensive, low visibility, covert, or clandestine operations, as well as the indirect activities of subversion, sabotage, intelligence gathering, and escape and evasion.

Unconventional warfare is often regarded as synonymous with guerrilla warfare, thereby obscuring its role in counterterrorism. This ignores the fact that it seeks political ends which affect the stability of nations. Unconventional warfare is a type of political and socioeconomic conflict with psychological elements. Moreover, although they can be protracted, unconventional wars are cyclical in nature. Variations in intensity may not equate to holding territory or imposing military government, which are associated with sustaining forces on the ground for extended periods. Understanding asymmetric warfare leads to the view that time horizons are undergoing change. Events in the last decade enabled protagonists to claim

victory by retaining power. Nonetheless, unconventional warfare is an accurate term of art, a form of conflict for which Special Operations Forces are uniquely qualified and must maintain a high level of readiness.

Within the Army, Special Forces claim unconventional warfare as their primary mission. The international environment the Nation is likely to face over the next ten to twenty years will remain a gray area between political conflict and total war. Under such conditions nonstate actors could threaten stability. This conclusion is consistent with the findings of the intelligence community. Testifying before Congress, the director of the Defense Intelligence Agency stated: "The 1990s were a time of transition and turmoil as familiar Cold War issues, precepts, structures, and strategies gave way to new security paradigms. . . . I expect the next ten to fifteen years to be at least as turbulent, if not more so."<sup>1</sup>

Technological and information-age innovations can be used to produce weapons of mass destruction and manipulate financial markets. Further, globalization may run counter to cultural norms and national impulses and result in enmity. In addition, transnational actors like terrorists can undermine sovereignty by operating across frontiers and establishing networks for support. There is also a proliferation of dual-use and military technology. Other factors include disaffected individuals and groups as well as global demographic trends that can result in social stratification, which breeds resentment and hostility. Unconventional warfare can succeed in this environment because it can enable weaker parties to take on stronger ones.

If one can perform tasks associated with unconventional warfare—the most demanding mission conducted by Special Forces—other SOF missions (such as special reconnaissance and direct action) can be conducted successfully. According to this view, unconventional warfare as defined traditionally proves so demanding and comprehensive that other missions are subsumed under it. The skills required for unconventional war are applicable across the board, from military operations other than war to high intensity conflicts. Special operations missions can be mounted in situations where a small force is required because of the sensitivities to operational and strategic missions in support of joint campaign plans during wartime.

## Strategic Context

National security strategy articulates American policies as well as interests and objectives around the globe. It also recognizes threats and challenges. Two aspects of protecting interests

**understanding asymmetric warfare leads to the view that time horizons are undergoing change**



Fleet Combat Camera Group, Atlantic (Michael Sandberg)

Loading leaflet dispenser.

and attaining objectives crystallized after 9/11, and both are related to unconventional warfare. First, potential enemies fall into two major categories: nations with traditional forces and nontraditional or nonstate actors that resort to terrorism or asymmetrical warfare. Both sorts of threats are less likely today to engage in force-on-force confrontations. Instead, they may resort to asymmetric or asynchronous strategies to inflict damage on friendly forces and undermine national will, exploiting ethical constraints as well as the obsession with declared endstates.

The second aspect is the interagency dimension of conflict. The military has learned over the last decade through peace operations and humanitarian assistance that it is no longer the only instrument of national security employed for these missions. It must deal with civilian agencies, foreign governments and militaries, nongovernmental

and international organizations, and other actors during and after a conflict. Afghanistan called for extensive coordination between Special Forces and paramilitary assets from the Central Intelligence Agency. Both considerations make Special Operations Forces not only the units of choice for the future but demand an understanding of unconventional warfare as an essential component of national security strategy.

### Instruments of Unconventional Warfare

Special operators possess skills for unconventional warfare which are politico-military in nature. They leave a small footprint and have the adaptability to operate without a huge logistic

system. They can act with speed and surprise. They have unique abilities to work with surrogate and indigenous forces, including foreign languages, regional expertise, and interpersonal skills, particularly in teaching military tactics and techniques.

Nonetheless, other means complement these competencies and are valuable in conducting unconventional warfare. One is psychological operations (PSYOP), the planned use of communications to influence the attitudes of foreign target audiences to achieve strategic objectives.

Another complementary activity is civil affairs. In the last decade, civil affairs units have repeatedly been called on to support humanitarian assistance and peace operations. Skills honed in these operations are transferable to unconventional warfare. Although structured primarily for theater warfare, civil affairs teams can help local governments and conduct civic action projects, a necessary component in securing support from the local populace in an unconventional warfare environment. They can restore basic services after a conflict like Afghanistan, where civil affairs units are surveying the needs of local people so international organizations can provide aid. They can also assist new governments and inexperienced leaders in public administration, thus molding the post-conflict situation. Such efforts are directed toward promoting conciliation with important levels of society to maintain stability.

These skills are also required in the global war on terrorism. Unfortunately, preliminary lessons gleaned from Afghanistan may narrow their use to the application of technology in future warfare or relegate SOF assets to roles that undermine their unconventional warfare capability.

### Future Operations

As previously noted, the future of unconventional warfare was debated prior to 9/11. In view of the success of Special Operations Forces in Afghanistan and its influence on perceptions of policymakers and unified commanders as a capability for combating terrorism, the demand for such assets is growing dramatically. In turning to this resource, strategic leaders must examine the part it should play in troubled regions of the world.

A number of considerations which bear on the experience of Special Operations Forces in Afghanistan have implications for missions and force structure. Some leaders may assume that special operators are only effective in combating terrorism when performing limited conventional support missions as part of combined arms teams. This view has a long history in defense circles,

### Afghanistan may relegate SOF assets to roles that undermine their unconventional warfare capability





where synchronization is the accepted norm. Senior civilian officials and military officers hew to this rule out of fear that Special Operations Forces may become either too independent or eclipse conventional forces. Yet unconventional operations certainly complement conventional operations and must support joint planning when practicable. While the effects of SOF assets may not be as precise as armored formations or as predictable as deliberate attack, the benefits of employing them in a limited capacity far outweigh the issue of control, because less flexibility seriously erodes their capabilities. This approach has often been disregarded in the past because of the need for unconventional capabilities. However, it is a lesson that senior leaders seem willing to learn repeatedly.

Another consideration may be increasing the size or expanding the range of SOF assets. There has been speculation in the media that airborne units could be transferred to U.S. Special Operations Command. Such proposals ignore the facts that make special operators successful. They

could also adulterate the quality of the force and reorient it from unconventional warfare to a form of elite infantry, which it is not.

Third, aside from the belief that success in Afghanistan is a model for other applications, decisionmakers may want to use SOF assets to combat terrorism in ill-advised ways. They may seek to deploy them with other agencies, such as intelligence and law enforcement, to form joint interagency task forces. Although SOF personnel can work in an interagency environment, they would be reduced to staff responsibilities of marginal utility, given that such task forces would be focused on intelligence analysis, interrogating detainees, and freezing assets. There are fewer than 30,000 SOF personnel in the Army, many within the Reserve components such as civil affairs and psychological operations units. Interagency assignment is not a judicious use of scarce assets.

Another approach would be using SOF assets to train foreign armies in counterterrorism, which

is the only form of U.S. presence some countries will tolerate. Though worthwhile, treating counterterrorism as a one-dimensional mission, as seems to be the situation in the Philippines, may be a mistake. Terrorism is not an end in itself, but rather a technique to create fear and destabilize regimes. Groups such as al Qaeda seek to overthrow governments and are insurgent. This sort of threat is reactionary-traditionalist or spiritual in nature. It tries to restore an arcane political order, which is romanticized. Terrorism is a political tool that is used because no other instrument is available or the situation has not matured to the point where guerrilla warfare is feasible.

Insurgency is fostered by popular resentment of authority. This disaffection gives rise to resistance or violence against existing regimes. Therefore, foreign militaries must be trained not only in civil disturbances and hostage rescue, but also counterinsurgency tactics, techniques, and procedures. For example, parts of the Philippines are becoming unstable and Muslim extremist groups are expanding. Meeting this challenge will require more than training local forces, which are identified with social inequality and a failed justice system. Insurgents survive because of weak control by national authorities and sympathetic populations. Manila requires better tools to counter insurgents, and Washington—calling on civilian and military capabilities—can assist when not limited to teaching hostage rescue techniques.

### On the Right Path

Underpinning special operations in Afghanistan was the concept of engagement—that is, enhancing national security through systematic and integrated

### unconventional warfare must not be limited to hot wars or large-scale operations

global leadership to influence state or nonstate actors. SOF personnel are effective because of area expertise, which is honed over many years. They routinely deploy overseas and develop close relationships with foreign counterparts. For instance, Uzbekistani support of operations in Afghanistan was facilitated by the earlier visit of a Special Forces training team. SOF political-military efforts promoted long-term objectives. Such an approach must be sustained not only for the sake of counterterrorism, but to ensure that Special Operations Forces are capable of conducting unconventional warfare.

Moreover, SOF assets are global scouts. Some of their critical work is performed prior to a crisis. Such efforts, often in the context of foreign internal defense, are linked to proper conduct in dealing with civilians where insurgency is likely.<sup>2</sup>



55th Signal Company (Robert Hyatt)

SOF personnel are models of proper behavior among local populations and do not create enemy sympathizers. Such conduct also aids in collecting intelligence. In some nations, relationships may include helping form local militias or civilian defense forces, thus strengthening communities as well as respect for human rights. This fact was recognized by policymakers as an emerging post-Cold War role. If a crisis erupts while special operators are deployed, they provide instant presence for unified commanders. In addition, both psychological operations and civil affairs on the strategic and tactical levels must be emphasized since they clarify foreign policy objectives through favorable impressions of U.S. military activity in a region.

Unconventional warfare also puts demands on the operational skills of both civilian and military organizations. DOD must augment SOF missions in those areas plagued by insurgency. Emphasis must be placed on agricultural and economic efforts sponsored by the U.S. Agency for International Development—objectives consistent with the global alliance, which is the model for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Such development is crucial to U.S. strategic interests. Unconventional

Searching for hidden arms cache.



55th Signal Company (Fred Gurwell)

Civil Affairs personnel with village elders.



55th Signal Company (Marshall Emerson)

warfare must not be limited to hot wars or large-scale operations. A judicious admixture of training and development may lead to a lasting victory without dramatic headlines.

Next, the military must analyze irregular and revolutionary warfare, not only by revisiting past conflicts but also in projecting future confrontations, which include political, economic, and social views as well as cultural and religious biases of potential enemies. The importance of area expertise cannot be overestimated. Understanding operational environments must form part of training for SOF personnel, such as intelligence analysts and operatives. Equally significant are the strengths and weaknesses of allies and friends. Anecdotal evidence from Afghanistan suggests that SOF personnel must be proficient in several languages within their area of operations.

DOD must consider innovations for use in various environments, such as urban warfare, and the means to accomplish missions, from non-lethal weaponry to sophisticated communication equipment. There must also be an appraisal of SOF capabilities for the future.

A counterterrorism or counterinsurgency strategy must integrate military and information

instruments of national power, including public diplomacy and psychological operations as well as civic action conducted. The lessons of the Vietnam War are pertinent. Interagency relations must be enhanced to offset the lack of an integrated counterinsurgency strategy and national mechanism to coordinate it. This effort must focus on the Department of State (especially public diplomacy); the intelligence community, because human intelligence, counterintelligence, and area expertise are critical (SOF personnel who return from overseas are a trove of information); and the U.S. Agency for International Development, which must act as a full partner in working with local populations.

Even superpowers can lose asymmetric wars. The ideal response to such conflicts requires preparing for engagements despite technological advantages. Committing forces may cause public opinion to become a center of gravity, a vulnerability that insurgents exploit. In addition, when forces are committed, counterinsurgency missions must be entrusted to those especially trained and equipped for them. Winning hearts





Preparing PSYOP leaflets.



Checking for munitions outside Kabul.

1st Combat Camera Squadron (Bethann Hunt)

and minds is integral to defeating insurgency, an axiom initially invoked during the emergency in Malaya—the model of a successful counterinsurgency campaign.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, emphasizing one mission over another does not come without friction. Allocating resources is diffi-

cult, and upgrading unconventional warfare will require personnel as well as resources that are not included in the current budget. U.S. Special Operations Command must reexamine planning and budgeting processes to determine if the unconventional warfare mission, in its broadest sense, is amply supported.

The successes of military operations in Afghanistan are being jeopardized by misreading them. Although Special Operations Forces are credited with defeating Taliban and al Qaeda

forces, too much emphasis can be put on coordinating ground and air attacks while recruiting anti-Taliban fighters is underestimated. The latter capacity resulted from employing SOF assets in unconventional warfare. Comprehending this subtlety will be critical in future operations. While there are not many Afghanists in the world, potential alliances abound. The rise of insurgent and irredentist movements (sometimes equated with terrorist initiatives exclusively), coupled with asymmetric threats, demands a strategic vision for unconventional warfare. **JFQ**

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Thomas R. Wilson, "Global Threats and Challenges," statement before the Senate Armed Services Committee, March 19, 2002, <http://www.dia.mil/Public/Press/statement04.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Anthony J. Joes, *America and Guerilla Warfare* (Lexington, Ky.: University of Kentucky Press, 2000), pp. 330–32.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Howard, "Mistake to Declare This a War," *RUSI Journal*, vol. 46, no. 6, (December 2001), p. 2.